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Messermänner and Parasiten: An Analysis of the Role of Metonymic and Metaphoric Patterns in Shaping "Immigrants" Stereotypes in German Political Discourse

Abstract

George Lakoff was the first to postulate a relationship between metonymic phenomena and social stereotypes (1987: 79). In Schmid's view (2002: 293), Lakoffs' idea of stereotype is characterized by the fact that it is strictly connected with the social conventions and beliefs shared within a speech community. There are many studies on political discourse which explore the role of figurative speech in shaping social stereotypes. Most of them though deal mainly with metaphor (cf. Musolff 2004, 2011, 2015; Spieß 2017, 2019). Conversely, the present paper aims at conducting an analysis of the two German expressions *Messermänner* and *Parasiten*, with particular reference to the fundamental role of metonymic phenomena in the interaction between metaphoric and metonymic patterns. The abovementioned expressions were used by two AfD politicians to refer to the social category of immigrants. The discussion will highlight differences and commonalities between the two expressions with reference both to metonymic and metaphoric patterns and to their relation to the conceptualization of the "immigrants" in German political discourse. The results will show that, even if in different ways metonymic models play a fundamental role in both expressions in the definition of the negative social stereotype.

Keywords: metonymy, metaphor, stereotype, migration, German

1. Introduction

The number of studies concerning the role of metonymic phenomena in the conceptualization of speakers has increased considerably since the publication of *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Even though the first definition of metonymy containing references to conceptual contiguity goes back to Léonce Roudet (1921: 690), the first attempt to set the floor for a theory of metonymy was carried by Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövecses almost eighty years later (1998; 1999). The definition provided by the authors is the following: "Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model" (Radden and Kövecses 1999: 21).

Not few are the studies which aim at defining metonymy in contrast or in interaction with metaphoric phenomena (Goossens 1990; Barcelona 2000a, 2000b; Radden 2000; Dirven and Pörings 2002; Barnden 2010; 2013 Kövecses). According to George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989: 103), metonymy and metaphor are to be considered as two distinct phenomena, since metaphors involve a projection of a source domain onto a target domain; on the other hand, metonymy is said to be primarily used for reference (cf. also Ruiz de Mendoza and Otal Campo 2002: 24) and to operate within the same conceptual domain and to presuppose a “stand for” relationship between vehicle and target. On the other hand, Antonio Barcelona (2000a) and Radden (2000) show that the distinction between the two phenomena should be regarded as scalar and interpreted in terms of a continuum.

The notion of a scalar distinction between metaphor and metonymy invites us to reflect on the motivation of metaphoric phenomena and on the role that metonymy plays in metaphorical mappings. According to John Taylor (2002: 325), metonymy is one of the most fundamental processes of meaning extension, and it is even more basic than metaphor; this last consideration is not in contrast with the view of Barcelona (2000b), who aims at showing that every conceptual metaphor is characterized by a metonymic motivation. In other words, according to Barcelona (Taylor 2000b: 31) “every metaphorical mapping presupposes a conceptually prior metonymic mapping, or to put it differently, that the seeds for *any* metaphorical transfer are to be found in a metonymic projection”. Barcelona provides several examples in order to shed light on the metonymic motivation of metaphors. A clear one is represented by expressions such as *Her heart was filled with sorrow*, where the underlying HEART IS A LOCUS FOR EMOTIONS metaphor is partially motivated by the PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECT OF EMOTION FOR EMOTION metonymy (Barcelona 2000b: 31). This means that in similar cases the metonymization of the behavioral response to the emotion (e.g. the change of the heartbeat rate) functions as the conceptual motivation of the emotion-metaphor.

Another fundamental conceptual function of metonymy is that it operates as a structuring principle (together with metaphor, propositional structure and image-schematic structure) within our *idealized cognitive models*, or ICMs. ICMs are structures through which our knowledge is organized according to Lakoff (1987: 68). Lakoff means that metonymic models can also account for prototype effects, where a subcategory or member or submodel stands for a whole conceptual category, i.e. it is used to comprehend the category as a whole Lakoff (1987: 79). In some cases, prototypical members are used to formulate quick judgments about people, in other words they acquire the status of stereotypes. Lakoff’s conclusion is that “social stereotypes are cases of metonymy – where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole” (Lakoff 1987: 79). Lakoffian social stereotypes are to be interpreted in terms of *Limitations-Stereotypen* according to Klaus-Peter Konearding (2001: 169), which is to say structures of our knowledge that can account for quick and simplified evaluations.

The spreading of stereotypes may define speakers’ expectations about social reality: metaphoric and metonymic phenomena often play a crucial role in the conceptualization of social categories and they can contribute in shaping and spreading *Limitations-Stereotype*. The majority of studies have focused on the role of metaphor (Musolff 2004, 2011, 2015; Spieß 2017, 2019), whereas the role of metonymy has been mostly neglected or taken for granted.

The present paper thus aims at conducting an analysis of the two German expressions *Messermänner* and *Parasiten*, which were used in order to refer to the social category of immigrants, with particular reference to the fundamental role of metonymic phenomena in the interaction between metaphoric and

metonymic patterns¹. The analysis of the two expressions and their argumentative context (cf. section 2) will provide an insight of the complex interactions between metonymy and metaphor coming into play into speaker's conceptualization and which potentially contribute to shaping "immigrants" stereotypes.

2. *Burkas and Taugenichtse*

It is well known that stereotypes play a fundamental role in social integration by structuring ideologies, forms of political activity and of social action (Schaff 1984: 91). According to Craig McGarty (2002: 18) the psychological instantiation of a stereotype serves the purpose of making sense of aspects of some group; at the same time, it tends "to combine perceived equivalence, background knowledge and category labels in ways which are readily transmitted to other members of society" (McGarty 2002: 18). McGarty (McGarty 2002: 19) includes in his considerations concerning stereotypes the "power of communicative acts", which are capable of conveying representations of social groups to other people. In many cases (written and oral) texts act as cultural inputs and exert a decisive influence on the construction of in-groups and out-groups (Hart 2010: 49). In the in/out-group construction processes, referential strategies are of great importance: according to Dan Sperber (1994: 59), a mere label used to designate a person is enough to lead to her categorization.

The power of a communicative act and its probability of conveying a particular view on a social category increases in proportion to the quantity of the addressees of the text. In his study on the persuasive power of metaphors in political discourse, Jeffry Scott Mio (1997: 114) emphasizes the role of national media as tools of (both intentional and unintentional) manipulation. National media often report (not always with neutral intentions) quotes and considerations of politicians containing stereotypes and representations which are central to propaganda (Schaff 1984: 91). The language used by politicians is characterized by powerful emotive connotations which aim at persuading the addressees and shaping their views of the society (cf. Dieckmann 1969).

The desire to have a major impact on addressees' opinions is reflected in the frequent use of generalizing and hyperbolic expressions which often aim at arousing indignation and at persuading the addressee of the need for immediate action to change the situation. The two following short texts betray to the abovementioned desire:

- a) "Burkas, Kopftuchmädchen und alimentierte *Messermänner* und sonstige Taugenichtse werden unseren Wohlstand, das Wirtschaftswachstum und vor allem den Sozialstaat nicht sichern." (Alice Weidel 2018)²
- b) "Unser Deutschland leidet unter einem Befall von Schmarotzern und *Parasiten*, welche dem deutschen Volk das Fleisch von den Knochen fressen will." (Thomas Göbel 2017)³

1 The expression *Messermänner* is often used in order to refer to those immigrant people who carried out (or are suspected of having carried out) an attack with a knife. Thus with the abovementioned expression Alice Weidel (cf. section 2) refers to attacks of this kind, such as the "Würzburg train attack" in 2016 or the attack in Chemnitz in 2018.

2 "Burqas, headscarf-girls and assisted (by the government) *knife-men* and other good-for-nothings will not secure our prosperity, economic growth and, above all, the welfare state". Unless otherwise indicated translations and words italicized are those of the author. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYHWsq7vSTQ>; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/alice-weidel-provoziert-mit-kopftuchmaedchen-aussage-15593291.html> [date of access: 17/15/2018].

3 "Our Germany suffers from an infestation of moochers and parasites that want to eat the flesh off the bones of the German people." Unless otherwise indicated translations and words italicized are those of the author. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/>

Sentence (a) was uttered by Alice Weidel, the co-leader of the AfD party, during a debate in the Bundestag. In addition to *Messermänner* (knife-men) (cf. section 3), the sentence contains two metonymic DEFINING PROPERTY OF A CATEGORY FOR THE WHOLE CATEGORY expressions, i.e. *Burkas* (burqas) and *Taugenichtse* (good-for-nothings).

In the first case, Weidel refers to a whole social category by means of a perceptually salient aspect: the burqa. The word *Burka* is literally used to refer to a garment which covers the body and the face, generally worn by Muslim women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and in some parts of India⁴. *Burkas* is not used here with its “literal” meaning, i.e. in reference to the primary conceptual domain it usually evokes (cf. Croft 1993): simply put, *Burkas* is a case of PART FOR WHOLE (or source-in-target) metonymy where the garment stands for those people wearing it, who in their turn stand for the artificially created social category “Muslim immigrant women”.

Jeannette Littlemore (2015: 24) would probably define this expression as a case of a PART FOR WHOLE metonymy in which the DEFINING PROPERTY OF A CATEGORY STANDS FOR THE WHOLE CATEGORY. By means of this metonymy, Weidel refers to an artificially created category of people who share a specific feature (*Burka*). The expression not only selects the garment as the focus of attention, it also contributes in backgrounding the referred individuals as a whole. By resorting to this expression, Weidel aims at conveying a negative idea of the referred individuals; at the same time, this lexical choice has the effect of downplaying the human status of the referents: the human referent completely disappears, and the garment becomes the focus of attention.

Instead, the case of *Taugenichtse* (good-for-nothings) is slightly different: the artificially created category is accessed metonymically by means of abstraction of an aspect which is not immediately visible as in the cases of the expressions referring to garments. *Taugenichtse* may be interpreted as a case of metonymic chain (cf. Brdar and Brdar 2011) in which the behavior standing for its consequences (CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy) also stands for the referred individuals. This means that the salient aspect of the behavior makes sense in this context only if understood in terms of its social consequences, which can be paraphrased as “lack of contribution to the social (and thus moral) progress of the country”. The metonymic chain can be thus represented as follows:

- 1) EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymy, in which the behavior of some social members stands for its consequences.
- 2) DEFINING PROPERTY OF A CATEGORY STANDS FOR THE WHOLE CATEGORY metonymy, in which the social consequences of a particular behavior stand for the whole social category.

Conversely, sentence (b) was uttered by Thomas Göbel, a member of the AfD party at a Pegida (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*) demonstration. The sentence is characterized by a high “metaphorical density”. The two metaphorical expressions *Schmarotzern* (moochers) and *Parasiten* (parasites) (cf. section 3) are immediately noticeable. Moreover, it is the whole sentence here that contains traces of an overall comprehension of the social category of immigrants in terms of animals. This can be explained by ascribing the conceptualization underlying the sentence to the metaphor system of The Great Chain of Being (cf. Lakoff and Turner 1989: 72). The Great Chain of Being metaphor system accounts for how objects or things in the world are conceptualized. Much of human behavior is often understood in terms

themen/reportage/rechte-vor-einzug-in-den-bundestag-so-extrem-sind-die-kandidaten-der-afd/20350578.html; <https://www.blog-der-republik.de/der-feind-der-demokratie-steht-rechts/> [date of access: 26/06/2017].

4 Source: https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Burka_Ganzkoerperumhang [date of access: 7.10.2021].

of animal behavior (cf. also Kövecses 2002): [in:] (b), the immigrants *fressen* (the verb, that can be translated as *devour* or *eat hungrily* or *quickly*, is usually used with reference to animals: cf. Ziem 2010) *dem deutschen Volk das Fleisch von den Knochen* (the flesh off the bones of the German people). In this metaphor the German people play the part of the potential prey that could be devoured by the *Parasiten* (parasites). Otto Santa Ana (1999: 216) claims that the conceptual correspondence IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS (which seem to be widespread in migration discourse) is racist since it has the potential to subordinate immigrants to other human beings: “it belittles immigrants as it separates non-citizens and citizens” (Santa Ana 1999: 216) and assigns them a less-than-human standing.

Another interesting aspect is choice of the expression *unter einem Befall leiden* (to suffer from an infestation), which can be ascribed to a widespread pattern in migration discourse that conveys the notion of migration a natural disaster: an *epidemic* in this case (cf. Musolff 2011: 12). This notion aims at alarming the addressees and at persuading them to support policies that want to emplace restrictions upon immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The above mentioned lexical choices are capable of achieving emotive effects and contribute to what Christopher Hart (2010: 63) defines *emotive coercion*, i.e. “an intention to affect the beliefs, emotions and behaviors of others in such a way that suits one’s own interests” (Hart 2010: 63).

3. Immigrants as *Messermänner* and *Parasiten*

As we have seen, while sentence (a) is mainly composed by metonymic elements, the conceptualization underlying sentence (b) seems to be mostly of metaphoric nature (cf. section 2).

Now, a closer look at the two expressions *Messermänner* (knife-men) and *Parasiten* (parasites) will allow us to further explore the complex interaction of metonymic and metaphoric patterns in shaping stereotypes. The following analysis will show that in these two expressions metonymy is more basic than metaphor, insofar as it is prior to metaphorical phenomena and it is a necessary condition for the metaphor to operate.

Messermänner (knife-men) is eminently metonymic in nature. More precisely, the expression is motivated by a complex implicit metonymic chain of which the average speaker may not be aware. The compound is formed by two lexical morphemes: *Messer* (knife or knives) and *-männer* (men). The second lexical morpheme (*-männer*) keeps the target, i.e. “immigrants”, conceptually “visible” in the expression. *Messer* (knife) is thus the element which triggers the metonymy. The metonymic chain can be simplified as follows:

- 1) INSTRUMENT *Messer* (knife) FOR ACTION (knife for stabbing / potentially killing people).
- 2) ACTION “stabbing” FOR PROPERTY / SALIENT CHARACTERISTIC of those individuals (immigrants) who actually stabbed other people.
- 3) SUBCATEGORY (immigrants who actually stabbed people) FOR WHOLE CATEGORY (all immigrants): the above-mentioned aspects are transposed to the whole category by means of generalization.⁵

⁵ I would like to thank Professor Günter Radden for his precious comments on this analysis.

As can be seen from the analysis, the conceptual metonymy postulated by Lakoff (1987: 79) SUBCATEGORY FOR WHOLE CATEGORY represents the last metonymic step in the chain. This metonymy is responsible for the generalization which allows a salient aspect (or aspects) of an individual (or a number of individuals) to be transposed to the whole category. The first metonymic shift maps the INSTRUMENT subdomain onto the ACTION subdomain: to put it another way, the *Messer* (knife/knives) stands for the action of stabbing (which could potentially cause the death of a victim). With the second metonymic shift the action of “stabbing” becomes a salient characteristic of those individuals (“immigrants”) who actually stabbed people with a knife. It is important to emphasize that the fact that the abovementioned individuals are immigrants is of central importance to the speaker, i.e. their actions would depend on their status of immigrants (i.e. “non-German citizens”).

As anticipated, the third and last metonymic shift is the crucial one: it allows the other two shifts (i.e. INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION and ACTION FOR PROPERTY) to be transposed to the whole category of “immigrants”. The result is that all immigrants are potentially *Messermänner* (knife-men) according to the conceptualization conveyed by Alice Weidel and thus dangerous to the German people. It can be noted that this last metonymic shift doesn’t show up in the sentence, while the other two are easier to perceive in the analyzed expression.

The metaphor *Parasiten* (parasites) has been the subject of much consideration in cognitive linguistics (cf. Dirven *et al.* 2001; Musolff 2004, 2015; O’Halloran 2007; Charteris-Black 2011; Wehling 2016; Csatar *et al.* 2019). Göbel’s sentence (cf. section 2) seems to be motivated by a more general corporeal metaphor which is widespread in politics: NATION IS A BODY / NATION IS A PERSON (cf. Santa Ana 1999; Charteris-Black 2004; Musolff 2004), in which the “body” (“Germany” in this case) must be shielded from diseases and parasites. The general metaphor implicitly points out the pathological status of the country, for which the immigrants are responsible.

In this regard, Jonathan Charteris-Black (2011: 270) reminds us that the “parasite” metaphor (which is part of the more general NATION IS A BODY metaphor) was used with reference to a human topic in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and in the Nazi terminology: “It was only by thinking of Jews as if they were animals or insects that permitted those in charge of following instructions to implement the policy of the final solution” (Charteris-Black 2011: 22) (cf. also Dirven *et al.* 2001: 3). Andreas Musolff (2015: 51) argues that the “parasite” imagery should be considered as dehumanizing and potentially socially dangerous. Usually it seems to be part of the SCROUNGE scenario (Musolff 2015:51), in which social parasites are considered to be scroungers and spongers. Musolff (2015: 51) shows that there seem to be two historical antecedents for “parasite” metaphors in today’s usage: a) an ancient figure of the lazy scrounger (the socio-parasite, etymologically and diachronically antecedent); b) the (popular) science version of a bio-parasite. Therefore, the only way to identify the source domain of the metaphor is to consider argumentative context. Since the word *Befall* (infestation) usually evokes an ILLNESS scenario, and since the second part of the sentence includes the image of parasites that “want to eat the flesh off the bones of the German people”, it can be assumed that the source domain of the metaphor is represented by the science version of a bio-parasite. Even though ordinary speakers probably do not know much about parasites, they may have experience with the unpleasant consequences of their behavior (cf. also Ungerer and Schmid 1996: 147).

As pointed out in section 2 (cf. above), the *Parasiten* metaphor can be ascribed to the metaphor system of The Great Chain of Being (cf. Lakoff and Turner 1989: 7), which accounts for how objects or things in the world are conceptualized. In this case, human behavior is understood in terms of parasitic behavior. However, it must be considered that also in this expression conceptual metonymy plays a fundamental role. In order for the

metaphor to operate, there must be a metonymic basis which allows the speaker to comprehend immigrants in terms of parasites and which is prior to the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor:

- 1) PART FOR WHOLE metonymic basis: SUBCATEGORY (stereotypical immigrants who live at the expense of society and by doing so damage it) FOR WHOLE CATEGORY (all immigrants).
- 2) Conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS (cf. Lakoff and Turner 1989): some aspects of (stereotypical) immigrants are comprehended in terms of some aspects of (stereotypical) parasites (living at the expense of the host and thus damaging it).

As can be seen, the Lakoffian metonymic model (Lakoff 1987: 79) seems to be necessary for the metaphor to take place. In other words, the metaphor has a metonymic basis that doesn't even show up in language, which is responsible for the negative stereotype (i.e. for the transposition of the salient negative aspects to the whole category of "immigrants").

It seems obvious that even though the NATION IS A BODY metaphor is independent from the PART FOR WHOLE metonymic model, the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor, which seem to operate as an entailment of the more general NATION IS A BODY metaphor could not take place without the negative stereotype (i.e. the SUBCATEGORY FOR WHOLE CATEGORY metonymy). This means that it is the stereotype that triggers the conceptual mechanism which evokes the (independent) general NATION IS A BODY scenario and "situates" the "parasites" (immigrants) within it.

It can also be noted that in this case the source domain of the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor is in its turn characterized by a CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy, which is fully projected onto the target domain of "immigrants", that is to say that the parasites (and by means of the metaphor the immigrants) are comprehended here in terms of the consequences of their parasitic behavior: living at the expense of the host and by doing so damaging (in the worst case, killing) it.

To sum up: a) the metaphor *Parasiten* is part of the more general (and metonymy-independent) metaphor NATION IS A BODY; b) the metonymic model SUBCATEGORY FOR WHOLE CATEGORY is responsible for the emergence of the negative "immigrant" stereotype and, consequently, for the c) metaphoric mapping IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS. Moreover, the source domain of the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor seem to be characterized in its turn by a d) CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy which allows the speaker to conceptualize parasites (and consequently immigrants) not just in terms of organisms (or human beings), but in terms of their parasitic behavior. The previous analysis applies also to *Schmarotzer*.

4. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that interactions between metaphoric and metonymic phenomena play an important role in potentially shaping "immigrants" stereotypes and that the role of metonymy is fundamental both in the metonymic and in the metaphoric analyzed conceptualizations.

Section 2 contains an analysis of the argumentative context of the sentences (a) and (b). The analysis allowed us to focus on the general context and to identify metonymic and metaphoric phenomena. The "immigrants" stereotypes conveyed by sentence (a) are eminently of metonymic nature: *Messermänner*, *Burkas* and *Taugenichtse*. Conversely, it has also been pointed out that sentence (b) is characterized by a consistent number of metaphoric phenomena. The high "metaphorical density" of the sentence betrays

an overall stereotypical comprehension of the social category of immigrants in terms of animals, which can be ascribed to the metaphor system of The Great Chain of Being (cf. Lakoff and Turner 1989: 72).

In section 3 the two expressions *Messermänner* and *Parasiten* were analyzed in detail with reference to their argumentative context. The analysis has shown that the lakoffian SUBCATEGORY FOR WHOLE CATEGORY metonymy plays a fundamental role in both expressions regarding the emergence of negative stereotypical concepts. In the case of *Messermänner* it represents the third and last metonymic shift in a bottom-up process, in which the salient aspects of some members of a category are extended to the whole category (cf. section 3), engendering the stereotypical generalization. Conversely, in *Parasiten*, the metonymic model is prior to the metaphor; in other words, it represents the metonymic basis of the metaphor. It is only by means of the metonymic model (i.e. of the social stereotype) that the metaphor IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS operates within the more general metaphor NATION IS A BODY (that must be protected by diseases and parasites) (cf. Santa Ana 1999; Charteris-Black 2004; Musolf 2004).

Moreover, it has been noted that in the case of *Parasiten*, the source domain of the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor is in its turn characterized by a CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy. The metonymy is fully projected onto the target domain of “immigrants”, and, consequently, parasites (and by means of the metaphor the immigrants) are comprehended in terms of the consequences of their parasitic behavior, i.e. living at the expense of the host (the German country in this case) and by doing so damaging (in the worst case, killing) it.

Even if the more general metaphor NATION IS A BODY is independent from the metonymic model which accounts for the “immigrants” stereotype, it is the metonymic basis of the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor that triggers the conceptual mechanism which evokes the general NATION IS A BODY scenario and selects the “parasites” (immigrants) as one of its parts.

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